



Eternity in Our Hearts

How the Wisdom of Ecclesiastes
Frees Us to a Richer Reality

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Eternity in Our Hearts

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Dear Reader,

As I write these words, summer is slowly letting go. Autumn is spreading her golden hues over New Hampshire, tossing the trees in blustery breezes as the leaves fall in circles. I have always been drawn to autumn, and, in the same way, I am drawn to Ecclesiastes. They both teach us to let go, to die to self, and to see the beauty of the temporary and eternal. They point to death, reminding us that this life is precious, short, and beautiful. And they both show us the artistry, character, and glory of our God who is with us for eternity.

I first studied Ecclesiastes the summer before my health fell apart. I marveled at its literary genius and steeped my heart in the truth and wisdom it brings to every inch of life. My friends and I dissected it chapter by chapter, hungry for a life of richness and meaning. That fall, when my illness worsened to a breaking point, I remembered the words of Ecclesiastes and took courage, for health is vapor—only the Lord is steady. Then in the spring, when I had to let go of so many things I loved in order to rest, I remembered the Preacher's words that pleasures and accomplishments are "a striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11 ESV). God prepared my heart for these big changes by bringing me through

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Introduction



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Introduction

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

ECCLESIASTES 3:11 NIV

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.¹

C. S. LEWIS

Ecclésiastes is a book for today's age. The corporate world is described as a "rat race," depression and anxiety plague us, and social media perpetuates "FOMO," body image problems, and lifestyle comparison. We are dissatisfied. We always want just a little bit more as we look for the meaning of life in promotions, waistlines, or entertainment. It is no wonder that many of us echo the Preacher's cry: "Meaningless!" But deep in the middle of our Bibles is an often forgotten little book that addresses these things. My hope is to take us on a journey into the rich wisdom of Ecclesiastes so that we may discover together that "chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:17 NIV) only leads to disillusionment, but that chasing after God leads to eternal life, and life to the full.²

Ecclesiastes, at first glance, may seem confusing or depressing. But, if we look closely, we will see that it is a work of art from beginning to end, using rich imagery, poetry, and timeless aspects of life to point readers to our source of hope: Christ. The Preacher sketches a picture of life in black and white that looks bleak, pointless, and fleeting. But when we look at this life through the lens of eternity, with Christ's gift of redemption and his promise of life to the fullest, it is as if an artist dips a brush in paint and colors life in the most vivid of hues.

The overarching message of Ecclesiastes is that life without Christ is futile. The Preacher grapples with life's randomness, suffering, and cyclical nature by asking hard questions. He has lived with incredible

1 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ed. First HarperCollins Paperback Edition, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 136-137.

2 John 10:10.

wealth, power, and pleasure, but they weren't enough to satisfy him. This is a message for all of humanity in every era. Without Christ, we will never be satisfied because we were created for a relationship with him. In Christ, we find supreme satisfaction—no matter our circumstances—because God is the best thing, and he brings meaning to life.

Ecclesiastes explains that if we are living only for this lifetime, we are missing out. Only Jesus can bring true meaning, and Jesus brings meaning to *everything*, even the most mundane of days. This has incredible implications, because not only does it mean that life's joys can be truly enjoyed with God, but also the lows and boring things; with Jesus, vacuuming the floor has meaning.

Part of the beauty of Ecclesiastes is that it asks all the questions we want to but might be too scared to ask. It expresses all the frustrations we want to but perhaps don't feel like we should. Ecclesiastes is important because it lets us know that God can handle our big questions, our depression, our frustration, and our hopelessness. In fact, just expressing these things to God can make us aware of how much we need him. It is often when we are most disillusioned with this world that we turn to our heavenly Father.

And so, as we explore the wisdom this book holds, we will learn to hold the things of this earth loosely and cling tightly to the things of eternity. We will see that death without eternity makes life pointless, and that life apart from Christ is devoid of purpose. Thankfully, we all have the option to live life close to Christ, enjoying his presence and a hope that spans eternity.

The Wisdom Books

The wisdom books ask some of life's biggest questions: *Is God just? How do I live a fulfilling life? Is life worth living?* The three wisdom books in the Bible are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.³ Proverbs is seen as the most cheerful of the books, with observations about what is usually true of life: i.e., if you work hard, you will profit.⁴ Proverbs teaches that “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10 NIV), and that righteousness leads to flourishing.⁵ However, Job shows us that the righteous do not always prosper in the short run by telling the story of a man who followed God but lost everything in a season of testing. Job asks questions about God's sovereignty and justice in a world filled with suffering. Ecclesiastes explores the ideas of meaning and permanence, concluding that these things can only be found with God. The wisdom books are gifts, showing us that the Bible speaks to all corners of life—including the confusing and devastating ones.

These three books work together to guide us in a wise way of living. I encourage you to listen to the words of Job and Proverbs in addition to Ecclesiastes to gain a well-rounded view of God's wisdom. You might read through the other two books alongside this study or after you finish. It is always beautiful to learn firsthand, as we read and study, how all parts of the Bible work together to point to Christ and to edify our whole lives.

3 Psalms and Song of Solomon are sometimes included in this list, but they are most often categorized as poetry.

4 Proverbs 14:23.

5 Proverbs 11:28.

Who wrote Ecclesiastes?

The first words we read as we open Ecclesiastes are, “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1 ESV). The word “Preacher” here is literally *Qôhelet*, which can refer to a collector of words, gatherer, preacher, or speaker in an assembly.⁶ Many have assumed that *Qôhelet* (the Preacher) is Solomon, the son of David, not only because of the title in verse 1, but also because of the list of achievements in chapter 2 that are strongly reminiscent of his life. However, since *Qôhelet* is never named, the writing style doesn’t mirror Solomon’s other works, and “son of David” could refer to any of David’s descendants who sat on the throne, there is no way to know.⁷

Adding to these layers of mystery is the idea that the Preacher is probably not the author at all. He is referred to in the third person, and, after the Preacher’s words end in chapter 12, the author describes the Preacher’s life and character in the third person *and* the past tense. This makes it seem as though the author collected the Preacher’s words of wisdom to write into the book of Ecclesiastes.

Whatever the case, the timelessness of the book does not require clarity on authorship or even the date it was written. These words are ultimately from God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and written by man.

6 Blue Letter Bible, s.v. “Strong’s H6953 - *qôhelet* (n.)” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h6953/esv/wlc/0-1>, accessed January 27, 2022.

7 ZA Blog, “Who Wrote Ecclesiastes and What Does It Mean?” *Zondervan Academic*, HarperCollins Publishers, October 21, 2017, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/who-wrote-ecclesiastes-and-what-does-it-mean>, accessed January 27, 2022.

The anonymity of both the Preacher and the author gives this book even more of a timelessness. Ecclesiastes describes life for everyone at every time in history.

What to Expect

As we work our way through the book of Ecclesiastes, there will be daily reflections on the passage that answer questions we may have, connect the passage to other parts of God's Word, and apply the passage to our daily lives. Occasionally, we will read the same passage two days in a row, reflecting on different elements of the text each day. Passage length for any given day will range from a whole chapter to just one verse, and will often include secondary passages outside of the book of Ecclesiastes that help us connect the Preacher's ideas to all of Scripture and Jesus Christ's finished work of redemption.

Throughout each day's reading, you will have the chance to reflect on the passage. You can write the answers to your questions in the space provided or in a journal, call a friend to tell them what you are learning, or talk through the questions with God. The idea is to reflect in the way that helps you best process, understand, and retain God's Word. Do you best process internally or externally? Does writing answers down make you think, or is it more daunting than helpful? Do you retain things best when you teach them to someone else? There is freedom to reflect in the way that helps you digest the text, and if you aren't sure, try a different tactic every day until you find something that works well.

This study is divided into seven weeks, but my prayer is that you feel the freedom to take it at your own pace. Jesus came to free us from the heavy weight of religious tasks and free us *to* the abundant love of God. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone, and I hope that you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can put aside any shameful duty you feel surrounding Bible study to simply sit at the feet of your Savior like Mary, enjoying his presence and listening to his voice.⁸

Why All the Different Translations?

I'm not fluent in reading ancient Hebrew, and I'm guessing you aren't either. However, we have the privilege of selecting an English translation of the Bible to read from. You will see four different translations used throughout this book: English Standard Version (ESV), Christian Standard Bible (CSB), New International Version (NIV), and New Living Translation (NLT). Each translation brings something different and valuable to the table. The ESV is incredibly accurate in its translation of each specific word. The NLT and NIV are thought-for-thought translations, meaning they focus on conveying the meaning of phrases in the best possible way and are easier to read. The CSB is neither word-for-word or thought-for-thought, but instead tries to stay faithful to the original meaning of the text in a translation philosophy called "optimal equivalence." Each translation has different strengths, and each will be used in different circumstances depending on our needs.

⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9; Luke 10:38-42.

The other reason for using four different translations—sometimes at the same time—is that we can get a better feel for the text. Let’s say your personal Bible translation is ESV. You may read a passage in the ESV and not quite understand it. The first thing to turn to, always, is the Holy Spirit as you ask him to open your eyes to Scripture (we get to do this *anytime* we read God’s Word, not just when we don’t understand something!), but you can also look up another translation online to read it in a different way. Sometimes our brains just need that.

Reading in a different translation with slightly different wording also challenges our brains to re-comprehend the passage and its truth. If we are very familiar with certain passages, they can lose their potency or meaning in our mind. Our eyes glaze over. Reading in other translations may bring new life to Scripture to which we have grown hardened or blind.

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Prologue



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Prologue

A book like Ecclesiastes is best read all at once since reading just one verse or section by itself can be confusing. Context is important in all of Scripture and serves us well here in Ecclesiastes. By nature of close study, our journey into this book will be in smaller sections, but a full read through now will help us get our bearings in this unique wisdom book. (Note: As you read through, you might encounter sections that send off alarms in your head. It is important to understand that the Preacher sometimes paints an incomplete picture on purpose to show us what life under the sun looks like without the hope we have in God. Make note of these sections—they are very interesting!)

Pray,
*asking God to teach you
through his Word.*

Read
*or listen to the entire book of
Ecclesiastes. This will take the
average reader approximately
30 minutes. Brew a cup of your
favorite tea or coffee, sit in your
comfiest chair, and enjoy!*

Reflect

You may not know how to answer all of these questions after just one read through, and that is okay (and expected)! Don't put pressure on yourself; these questions are just to get us thinking. We will revisit these at the end of our time in Ecclesiastes, so answering them now in whatever capacity you can will help us look back at what God has revealed to us in his Word.

What stood out to you on your first read through? What ideas did you connect with?

What questions do you have about the text? What confused you?

Did you notice any repeated words or phrases?

What are the main ideas of Ecclesiastes?

What does Ecclesiastes say about God?

What does Ecclesiastes say about humanity?

How does Ecclesiastes point to Christ?

Speak or write out a prayer to God, letting him know your fears or uncertainties about this study, what you hope to learn, and what you want him to do in your heart as you study the book of Ecclesiastes.

A misty, layered landscape with mountains and a field of flowers. The foreground is filled with tall, dark green grasses and small blue and pink flowers. The middle ground shows rolling hills and mountains shrouded in a thick, white mist. The background features more distant, hazy mountain ranges under a pale, overcast sky. The overall mood is serene and ethereal.

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Week 1

Week One — Day One

Vapor

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2 ESV

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.
“Absolute futility,” says the Teacher.
“Absolute futility. Everything is futile.”

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2 CSB

Pray,
asking God to teach you
through his Word.

Read
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

There is a road in rural New Hampshire I drive a few times each summer that winds up a small mountain. At the top sits an old farmhouse with low stone walls looking down on pockets of valley between evergreens. I've watched the sun rise and set from this spot, but my favorite time to pull my car over to marvel here is at dawn or right after a rainstorm, when the mist rises in fragile white tendrils from the deep green valleys—like incense rising to heaven.

When was the last time you saw mist? Was it steam from your tea kettle? Was it in a field after a rainstorm? Was it your breath outside on a cold day? Fix that image in your mind as you read the first verse of Ecclesiastes.

The word “vanity,” “futility,” or whatever English noun your Bible translation uses appears many times throughout Ecclesiastes, a theme echoing through all twelve chapters. But looking at the original text, the Hebrew word *hebel* here means “vapor, breath.”¹ Any literal translation of *hebel* seems elusive, which is fitting for its meaning, but readers

1 Blue Letter Bible, s.v. “Strong’s H1892 - *hebel* (adv., n.)” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1892/esv/wlc/0-1>, accessed January 27, 2022.

can grasp the Preacher's idea.² Everything is *hebel*—slipping through fingers like mist, evaporating like vapor, and fragile like breath.

The word *hebel* is used heavily in Psalms and all three wisdom books. Clearly, there is wisdom in knowing that life is but a vapor. Because this is such an important word in Ecclesiastes, understanding its meaning will help us interpret the text correctly. So, to grasp the use of *hebel* in the Old Testament, let's look at a few passages.

“How then will you comfort me
with empty nothings [*hebel*]?

There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.”

JOB 21:34 ESV

If you are familiar with the book of Job, you will remember that in Job's intense suffering, his friends give long speeches blaming Job under the false belief that personal sin is always the cause for one's hardships. Here in Job's reply, we see him call their long-winded admonishments “empty nothings.” Job's words might remind us of Paul's when he writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1 ESV).

“I give up! I will not live forever.

Leave me alone, for my days are a breath [*hebel*].”

JOB 7:16 CSB

² Michael V. Fox, “The Meaning of *hebel* for *Qohelet*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (1986), 409-27.

In an earlier passage from the same book, Job tells his friends that his life is *hebel*. This idea that our lives are fleeting is expressed many times in the Bible, and it is true. Life slips quickly away, and, in the vastness of eternity, our time on earth is infinitely short. That is not to say that our life is devoid of purpose—recognizing how short and fragile life is can actually be a step toward truly finding purpose in life.

Thus says the LORD:

“What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness [*hebel*],
and became worthless?”

JEREMIAH 2:5 ESV

Jeremiah’s words from the Lord are a clear indicator that life apart from God is *hebel*, and this truth is the backbone of Ecclesiastes. Every earthly thing we chase and worship is incomparable to the God who created everything, who is infinitely satisfying, and who knows us better than we know ourselves.

So, how does this inform our study of Ecclesiastes? When we see “vanity,” “meaningless,” “futility,” or whatever word our Bible translation uses, we can think of the mist rising out of deep valleys, the steam from our coffee cup, or our breath curling into December air—here only for a moment before the sun rises, the coffee cools, or our breath dissipates. And then, gone.

The Preacher says that “everything” is *hebel*, and we will see as we venture further into his argument that he means everything of this temporary world. The more we see the impermanence of this life and the futility of activities under the sun, the more we will long for eternity. As Ecclesiastes unfolds, the Preacher laments the futility of living for this life, and as we realize that we were made to live for so much more, we will desire things eternal. We will desire God.

Do you ever feel like life is *hebel*? When do you usually feel this way? How does it feel to see this expressed in the Bible?

What verse from Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 was most interesting? What does this verse mean, and what does it contribute to the passage?

What questions do you have about the passage? What confused you or piqued your curiosity? Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your understanding of his Word. You might also consult a commentary (in print if you have one, or online if you don't) or talk it through with someone you trust.

Read Hebrews 13:8. How does this verse connect to our passage? What does this truth mean for your daily life?

Week One — Day Two

The Cyclical Nature of Life

What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

ECCLESIASTES 1:3 ESV

The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full.

ECCLESIASTES 1:5-7 NLT

Pray,
asking God to teach you
through his Word.

Read
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

What *do* we gain from all our toil under the sun? This is the very first question asked in the book of Ecclesiastes. People throughout the ages have asked and attempted to answer this question consciously and subconsciously. Let's visit the very first chapters of the Bible to understand God's original intent for work and why it's so hard now.

Read or listen to Genesis 1-3. *If you are short on time, just read Genesis 1:26-31, 2:7-9, 2:15-17, and 3:1-24.*

In the creation account in Genesis, we see God give the man and woman work. This was *before* they chose sin—before the world was broken—so work isn't simply a result of the fall. Instead, we see work given to man and woman as a blessing.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish

in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.”

GENESIS 1:28 NLT

Nevertheless, work here on earth is *hard*. Why? Because sin has consequences. When you throw a dish in anger, it breaks. On a much larger scale, when sin entered the world for the first time, the world became broken—sin became a disease we are all plagued by, sickness and death entered the world for the first time, and childbearing and work became hard. Listen to how God describes the consequences of people choosing sin and what that means for us living on this earth, under the sun:

And [God] said to the man, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘Do not eat from it’:

The ground is cursed because of you.

You will eat from it by means of painful labor
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow
until you return to the ground,
since you were taken from it.

For you are dust,
and you will return to dust.”

GENESIS 3:17-19 CSB

This is why work is hard and sometimes feels like endless toil. In the garden, there was great abundance because it was God’s sanctuary, and as Adam and Eve dwelled with the Lord, they had everything they needed and more. But, now that sin has entered the world, things are not perfect anymore. Work is hard. Survival is hard. We are dust, and to dust we will return. We live in a cyclical world for now, and the Preacher pens a poem about this phenomenon.

Close your eyes and picture our globe twirling in circles around the sun. Picture water churning downriver to be flung into a foaming ocean, only to eventually evaporate and come down on the earth again as rain. While these images are beautiful, the Preacher laments them as “wearisome beyond description” (Ecclesiastes 1:8 NLT).

A phrase the Preacher often uses is “under the sun.” We see this in today’s passage when he asks, “What do people get for all their hard work under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:3 NLT). “Under the sun” speaks of the things on this earth without God. The Preacher answers his own question by illustrating that people gain nothing of permanent value, which is evidenced by the patterns of nature and human life. People are born, people die, and life goes on. The cyclical nature of life means that things are always changing, but nothing is ever new. The work of man and nature never ends. Life can feel like running on a treadmill—you are constantly moving but never getting anywhere. Have you ever

vacuumed and washed your floors only to have someone come in five minutes later and walk all over the house with muddy shoes? That is how the Preacher feels about the world.

Do you relate to the Preacher? You may be thinking, *I don't relate at all! My life is beautiful and filled with meaning!* Or, you may think, *I completely agree—everything feels pointless. Why do we have to work and eat and sleep and do it every day until we die?* I have had both reactions at different times, and both are biblical! How? It is true that if all this life amounts to is eating, sleeping, working, and dying, it would be fairly pointless. If there is nothing beyond the grave, there is no point. It is also true that a life with God is filled with meaning. Knowing God doesn't necessarily make life easier, but it does make it richer, and life does not end with the grave.

Because God loves us, he died and rose again to pay for sin and defeat death so that if we choose to follow him we are restored to relationship with him and live forever with him in a perfect, truer version of this world. This promise is why we can have hope and why the book of Ecclesiastes is not as depressing as it seems at first glance. Once we take our eyes off the impermanent and set them on the permanent—Christ—*everything* in life takes on new meaning. The Preacher's cry is a wake-up call, letting us know that we might not be living in the

Read Ecclesiastes 1:4-11 once more.

realist reality. If things feel pointless sometimes, it is because they actually are pointless without God.

This section is a beautiful poem about the cyclical nature of the earth and its parallelism to the cyclical nature of human life and human accomplishments. Do you see the two different sections?

Write out (or circle in your Bible) the cyclical patterns we see in nature (verses 4-7). What are they?

Now, write out or circle the cyclical patterns we see in humanity (verses 8-11). What are they?

What parallels do you see between the two sections of the poem?

Which line in the poem strikes you the most?

How do you see the cyclical nature of life in your day-to-day life? Do you relate to the Preacher? Why or why not?

Look back to yesterday's reflection and note the questions you had about this passage. Were any of those questions answered today? Do you have any new questions? Again, ask the Holy Spirit to guide your understanding of his Word. You might also consult a commentary or talk it through with a trusted friend.

Read Genesis 3:13-15.

These verses are the first promise of Jesus. The offspring of Eve that would crush the snake's head (thus demolishing evil) is Christ himself. In the first moment that pain entered the world, God told us that he would someday take it away. In the first moment that we chose sin, God was prepared to sacrifice himself in death to save us from it. As we read Ecclesiastes, we will recognize the broken reality of our world—especially without Christ. But God replaces chaos with order, pain with healing, and evil with good.

We are not without hope. This cycle is not endless. Revelation 21-22 describes the new heaven and new earth as a garden city where the Lord dwells, in which there is great richness and abundance. The similarities between Eden and this new garden are striking, and they point to the fact that, all along, God has been leading us back home to his garden where we will dwell with him forever in perfect abundance. Ecclesiastes describes the earth in which we live as between the gardens, where there is sin, sorrow, and death. But as we recognize that this world is not our home, we see more clearly God's perfect plan of redemption to bring us home to him, and we can rejoice in that great hope.

Week One — Day Three

Buffet Stop No. 1: Wisdom

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

ECCLESIASTES 1:13-14 ESV

I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

ECCLESIASTES 1:16-18 ESV

Pray,
*asking God to teach you
through his Word.*

Read
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.

If you saw someone running around on a windy day with a glass jar scooping the air, you might wonder what they were doing. If you asked them and they replied, “Why, I’m chasing the wind, of course!” you would probably think they were joking. You could never catch the wind, and even if you did, how could you ever dream of containing it? Even if you held your jar out into a gust and screwed the lid on tight, it would no longer be wind—you would only have air.

That level of futility and silliness is what the Preacher tells us life “under heaven” (v. 13 ESV) or “under the sun” (v. 14 ESV) is like.

This passage contains two important phrases that will guide our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes.

One phrase we will see often is “striving after wind” (v. 14 ESV). Here, this phrase is paired with “vanity,” which we have already become acquainted with. Its poeticism plays an important role in helping us understand the Preacher’s point. If life is *hebel*—vanishing like mist in a few hours—then chasing after the things of this earth is like chasing the wind: impossible, pointless, and foolish.

The other phrase is “under the sun” (v. 14 ESV). The Preacher does not actually mean that *everything* is meaningless—that worldview is called “nihilism,” and the Bible is clear that there is great meaning in this life. Later on in this book, we see the Preacher assign significant meaning to many things, but the Preacher’s point is that meaning ultimately comes from and through God. And *that* is where we can begin to understand what he means.

The idea of a deity in the sky was widely accepted in many ancient cultures, and God used imagery and figures of speech that anyone in the ancient world would instantly recognize (I think that’s very kind and personal of him). However, we are not from the ancient Near East, and sometimes our western perspective hinders our understanding of God’s Word. Much of the imagery and figures of speech in the Old Testament refer to God as residing in the sky—not because they necessarily believed that he literally lives in the sky, but because of his great power and majesty that naturally lend themselves to great heights as well as his great abundance and care that Israel depended on for rain from heaven (no rain meant no crops, which meant no life).

Since heaven is God’s domain, anything that does *not* include heaven does not include the wonderful reality of God. “Under the sun” or “under heaven” speaks of a reality where we don’t take God into account and live like he doesn’t exist. And *that* is a futile, hopeless reality.

Verse 12 of the first chapter marks the beginning of the Preacher’s pursuit of purpose. He begins to list all the things he chased and sampled in this search. It’s like a buffet—the Preacher walks down

the line, filling his plate with all kinds of wonderful things. But when he sits down to eat, he isn't satisfied. Sure, that mac and cheese smelled heavenly—it even tasted good—but for some reason, it didn't fully satisfy.

The Preacher doesn't just take a little scoop of everything. Because he was a king, he had access to *everything*—all riches, privilege, and power. In addition to this, he claims that he had more wisdom than “all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16 ESV); another reason some suspect the Preacher is Solomon.¹ As we listen to him tell us about this buffet, we will see that he had as much of everything he could ever want.

The first thing he samples for satisfaction is wisdom (vv. 16-18). *Wait*, you might be thinking, *this is a wisdom book—is he really about to tell us that wisdom is hebel?* Yes, he is. Don't let this confuse you (and don't throw this study in the trash, either). Later on in his musings, the Preacher establishes that wisdom *is* worth pursuing. But let's hear him out for a minute. He doesn't actually use the word *hebel*, but the picture he paints evokes a similar image. Chasing wisdom is like chasing after the wind. You just can't pin it down. You can't see the wind, contain the wind, or run fast enough to keep up with it. It is impossible.

Only God can be all-wise and all-knowing. Even if we *did* know everything and have all wisdom, we are not all-powerful. This is probably what verse 18 is getting at: much knowledge *does* increase sorrow. Imagine knowing everything, seeing every single small and

¹ See 1 Kings 3.

large injustice, knowing each person's joy and sorrow and pain and sin—and not being able to fix it all (or any of it). The more we learn about the world, the smaller and more helpless we feel. Thankfully, God *is* all-powerful and has a plan to eradicate darkness and death, destroy sin and sorrow, and make all things right. That's the new home, the garden, we look forward to.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-24. What is true wisdom?

Write down any words, phrases, or ideas that you would use to define wisdom.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:13 again. The “unhappy business” (ESV) speaks again of life without God. All of life without God is meaningless. Do you believe this? Why or why not? Keep your eyes open for this concept as we study Ecclesiastes.

Week One — Day Four

Buffet Stop No. 2: Pleasure

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

ECCLESIASTES 2:1-3 ESV

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

ECCLESIASTES 2:1-3 NIV

Pray,
*asking God to teach you
through his Word.*

Read
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11.

After realizing that wisdom couldn't fulfill him completely, the Preacher turns next to pleasure. It is an easy mistake to make. When he was looking for the good and meaningful things in life, of course he turned to the things that bring enjoyment. Don't we do the same thing? The end of verse 3 reads, "I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives" (NIV). What *is* good for us to do during our short lives? This is a question we will ask over and over as we study Ecclesiastes.

It is not a problem to enjoy the things God has given us—indeed, the book of Ecclesiastes tells us *how* to enjoy these things. God is the giver of all good gifts, and our God is a God of abundance!¹ Pleasures and gifts only begin to be a problem when we use them to replace God in our hearts. Comedy, enjoyment, and pleasure often mask our pain. Certainly, "[a] cheerful heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22 NIV)! But this wound we all have is too deep to fill with entertainment. Is our "cheerful" heart actually desperate avoidance, or is it the peace and joy the Holy Spirit grows in us when we are abiding in Christ?²

¹ James 1:17; Ephesians 3:20; John 10:10.

² John 15, Galatians 5:22–23.

This heartache cannot be fixed with bandaids. Our longing is truly for God. That deep hole we try to fill with pleasure can only be filled by God because we were designed for a relationship with him.

The Preacher was asking different things to fulfill him in this life. We do the same. What makes life worth living to you? Is it relaxing or having fun on a weekend? Family? Summer vacation? A spouse? An ideal you are building (the perfect house, family life, etc.)? All of these things are very good, but we begin to be dissatisfied when we ask them to fulfill us. If the weekend is what makes life worth living and you get called in to work or your friends have to cancel plans with you, that will hurt just a little more. Why? Because you're losing control of a meaningful world. If you ask your spouse to fulfill you completely, you are going to have some unrealistic expectations of them (perhaps even subliminally), and when they don't live up to those expectations, you will be hurt—and, in turn, will likely hurt them. What we're asking these things to actually do is to fill God's shoes. And those are some big shoes to fill. What are you asking to fulfill you? What are you asking to fill God's shoes in your life?

Take some time and sit in silence with the Lord, asking him to bring to mind some things you are asking to fill God's shoes. Write them down here.

For my people have committed a double evil:
They have abandoned me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug cisterns for themselves—
cracked cisterns that cannot hold water.

JEREMIAH 2:13 CSB

Paraphrase (put into your own words) Jeremiah 2:13. Then choose a verse that stood out to you from today's passage and paraphrase that as well.

Verse	Paraphrase
Jer. 2:13	
Chosen Verse	

Are you more apt to search for meaning in pleasure or wisdom? Why?

Take some time with God and ask him to help you look to him for ultimate meaning. Ask him to remind and help you believe how big his shoes are and that only he can fill them. Ask him to remind and help you believe that he is the source of all meaning and satisfaction.

Week One — Day Five

Buffet Stop No. 3: Possessions and Accomplishments

And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 2:10-11 ESV

[Jesus] then told them, “Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because one’s life is not in the abundance of his possessions.”

LUKE 12:15 CSB

Pray,
*asking God to teach you
through his Word.*

Read
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11.

Just to be clear, the Bible is certainly not condoning having slaves and concubines.¹ The Preacher is simply reporting where he searched for meaning. It is sad to think about what the church and we individually see as “socially acceptable sins” in each day and age. In the Preacher’s time, one of those sins was polygamy. God’s design is always best for us—you can, in fact, read all about the consequences and complications of polygamy in Genesis. God is all-wise. We are not.

Take a moment to ask God what “acceptable sins” you have allowed to creep into your life unnoticed. Ask yourself why you are allowing those sins to stay. Are you looking to your “acceptable sins” for contentment?

¹ Rebecca McLaughlin’s book, *Confronting Christianity*, has an excellent chapter on this topic (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

If we let ourselves have whatever we wanted whenever we wanted it like the Preacher, we would be in big trouble. Trouble is exactly where Solomon found himself when he, in the fashion of kings and culture in those days, married hundreds of wives.² First Kings 11:3-4 tells us, “He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been” (NIV). Our desires can lead us away from God and away from his best plan for us if we do not keep our joy and purpose in him.

In the Preacher’s day and age, people probably looked at all of his wealth, accomplishments, and the size of his household in awe, thinking: *What a successful man!* But if you pull back the curtain a bit and examine the Preacher’s heart, a more accurate statement may be: *What a desperate man!* Picture these houses, gardens, parks, pools, vineyards, forests, herds, flocks, silver, and gold. When he says in verse 10, “And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them” (ESV), we can see that he is telling the truth. He really had *everything*.

² Whether or not Solomon is *Qohelet*, he is an excellent example of this passage—which is why many people believe him to be the Preacher.

Take a moment to be still before the Lord and ask him to reveal your heart. Is there anything you “collect” or “build” to satisfy yourself? This can be physical (e.g., a perfect house, vacations, food, the “ideal” body, or a certain salary) or nonphysical (e.g., a certain lifestyle, reputation, etc.).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a parable about the pointlessness of striving for earthly things with no care for eternal things.

Read Luke 12:15-21.

Jesus told this story about a man who stored up his abundant crops in many barns, but he died before he ever enjoyed this wealth. The NLT translates the last verse in this section, “Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God” (Luke 12:21 NLT). This story does not mean that we shouldn’t work hard or provide for ourselves and our families on earth; it warns against striving for satisfaction in the wrong direction. Jesus loves people too much to watch them waste their lives searching for satisfaction and meaning in earthly things that cannot fully satisfy. If we are storing up treasures in our metaphorical barns (bank accounts, fitness, social media platforms, friendships, etc.) and are putting our hope in those things instead of in Christ, we are missing out.

God designed us for a relationship with him. Before the first sin plunged the world into brokenness, Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden of Eden, experiencing all the richness that a relationship with him brings.³ But when we chose sin and put distance between us and God, we began looking for other things to fill us up—things that were never meant to satisfy and never can for long. Ecclesiastes 1:8

³ Genesis 3.

says, “No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content” (NLT). The good news is that Jesus extends his nail-scarred hands to us, beckons us home, and invites us to drink deeply of his forgiveness that is bigger than all our sin, his love that is bigger than all our insecurities, and his presence that is the most satisfying thing for our hearts.

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

PSALM 16:11 ESV

Ask God to help you think clearly about your life and look for patterns of misplaced satisfaction. Where do you see “satisfaction patterns” in your daily life? Look for what you worry about the most or what you feel like you need to be completely satisfied.

What are you storing up in your barns? Are you trying to make those things fill God's shoes?

Ask God to help you remember his goodness and promises and transfer your hope to him! Giving these misplaced satisfaction patterns over to the Lord might seem scary, but it actually frees us to worry less and live more lightly. Read Matthew 11:28-30 and turn it into a prayer. You might pray something like this:

God, I am weary and burdened; please help me *want* to come to you. Thank you for being gentle and humble in heart. My burdens are heavy; give me your easy yoke and your light burden, so that I can find rest for my soul.

Read Psalm 16:11. Have you ever experienced fullness of joy in God's presence? We can ask God to give us fullness of joy in his presence as we talk to him, sit in silence with him, study or meditate on his Word, and dwell with him throughout the day. Ask God to help you dwell with him today and ask him to reveal himself to you more.

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